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ABSTRACT

Family Friends is a nationwide outreach program that enlists the support of senior volunteers in providing nurturing help to children and their parents. Homeless Children is a branch of the program in which volunteers are matched to homeless families with young children, and, during biweekly visits to homeless shelters, become surrogate grandparents to the children. The volunteers serve as tutors and role models to the children and as advocates and sources of information to the families. Each local Family Friends/Homeless Children project involves a coalition of agencies. Each project has: (1) a project director, who is a trained professional with experience with at-risk families; (2) an advisory committee of community leaders, professionals, and specialists; (3) a local sponsoring agency that recruits and trains volunteers, provides education and recreation, works with public schools, serves as a liaison with health projects for the homeless, and provides information to families; and (4) volunteers, who are screened and trained. Establishing a Family Friends/Homeless Children program involves recruiting and training volunteers, selecting families to participate in the program, fundraising, and promoting and evaluating the program. (BC)

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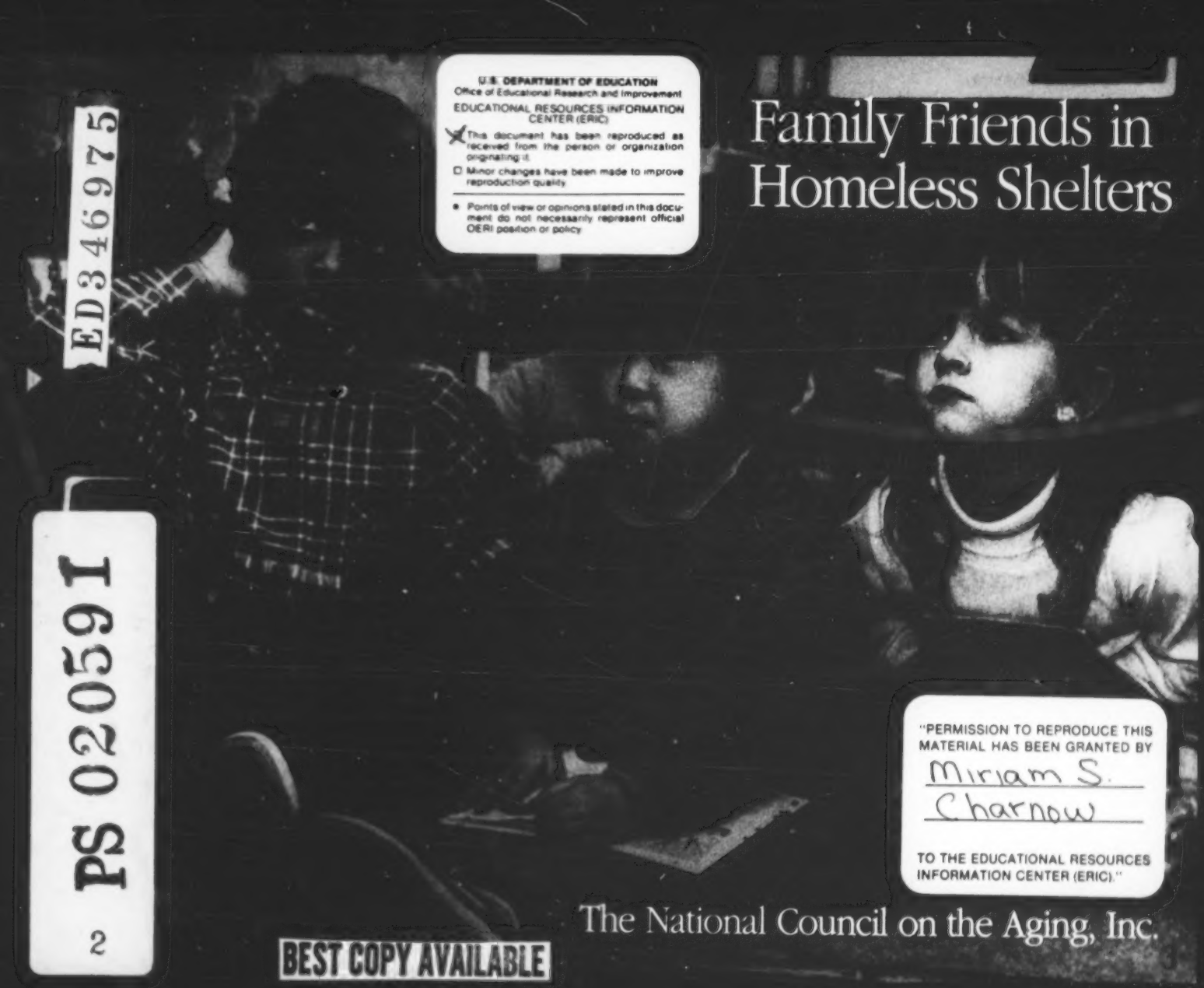
Family Friends in Homeless Shelters



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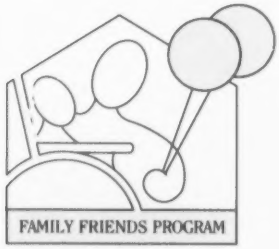
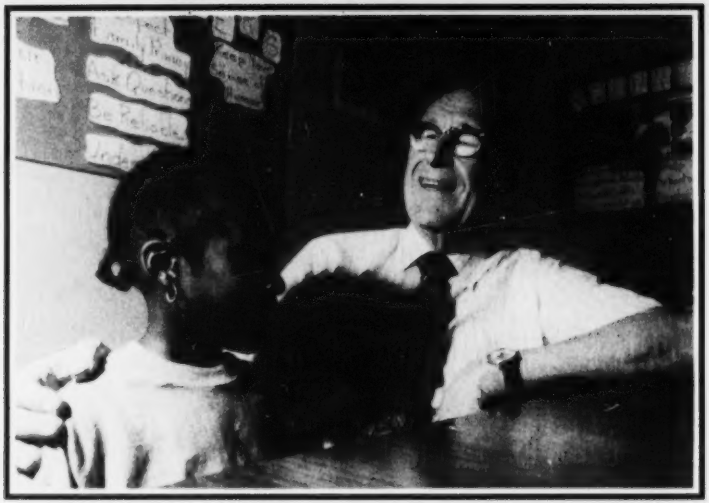
Family Friends in Homeless Shelters

Sponsored by The National Council on the Aging

"We've got no place to go,"
Karen told her Family Friend.





"Without their Family Friend, their days would be bleak indeed."

The three children on our cover are homeless. They are part of the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in our country.

But, despite the harsh realities facing them as they begin each day, they are not hopeless. Thanks to a group of volunteers called Family Friends, they know a special person who truly cares about them.

They listen in rapt attention as their Family Friend reads to them about the wonders of the world beyond their shelter. Their Family Friend takes them on excursions so they can see that world through eager eyes. That Family Friend gives their lives stability, hope, and warmth. Without their Family Friend, their days would be bleak indeed.

The shocking truth is that today's homeless person is likely to be part of a young family stemming from one of many diverse ethnic backgrounds. And—worst of all—the fastest growing group among the homeless is children under the age of 18, who are usually part of a family headed by a mother.

Nearly half a million children in this country do not have homes.

In New York City alone, 13,000 children and their families live in shelters and welfare hotels—the final move in a long line of desperate measures.

This growing phenomenon of homeless families and children is nothing short of a national crisis that must be treated with the urgency demanded by this critical situation. Providing needed services to these people depends heavily on the goodwill and efforts of dedicated volunteers.

The Family Friends/Homeless Children program provides one important kind of needed service to what is perhaps the homeless population's neediest segment — the children.

"It's a very hard world out there. Maybe in the smallest possible way I'm planting a seed in the mind of a child that there is a better way to live in the world than what he now knows," says Family Friend Harriet Raskin.

In Baltimore, a dozen men and women aged 55 and over come to the shelter twice a week to spend a couple of hours with a group of children or to take their individual "grandchild" on an outing to an art gallery, science center, aquarium, ball game, or even a pizza parlor.

Family Friends is a nationwide outreach program, created by The National Council on the Aging, that enlists the support of senior volunteers to provide nurturing help to children and their parents. Family Friends/Homeless Children is the arm of Family Friends that operates within homeless shelters.

Through Family Friends/Homeless Children, senior volunteers are matched to homeless families with young children. During their twice-weekly visits, the volunteers become surrogate grandparents lending a helping hand— and loving care—in a number of ways.

- **The Family Friend is available as a tutor.** Helping children with their studies paves the way for them to stay in school when many faced with their situation drop out.

- **The Family Friend gives parents some time off.** Being freed — even for a few hours—from the constant burden of child care and the worries that go with it gives parents a chance to look for housing and employment.

- **The Family Friend is an advocate of the homeless family.** Intervening with landlords who are too often reluctant to rent to a homeless family can make a world of difference to the children and their parents.

"Most important, I want them to feel good about themselves."

• **The Family Friend is a source of important information for the family.** Counseling the parents about available community services and providing access to "off the street" accommodations at senior centers, recreation centers, libraries, or other gathering places helps break the pattern of feeling helpless and unwanted.

• **The Family Friend is a valued role model and mentor.** Most of the mothers need advice on such matters as budgeting, handling bills, writing resumes, and preparing for job interviews. Family Friends can offer wisdom and insight into these tasks based on their own experience in the world and at home.

Tad is a seven-year-old who has no permanent address. His day begins at 5 a.m. because he must help his mother and younger sister pack up their few belongings and leave their "home" by 6:30 a.m.

They "live" in a shelter for the homeless.

Having a complete breakfast is not guaranteed; a cold snack is often all they can hope for.

Tad goes to school, but he knows he may not remain long in that particular school. Ashamed of being stigmatized as "homeless" by his schoolmates, he tends to avoid them. In fact, he seldom makes any friends and does not get involved in school activities. He knows how great the pain will be when he's forced to leave, because he's been through this before.

During the day, Tad's mother must use public transportation to seek permanent housing, employment, and another shelter for the next night. Tad sees his father infrequently, because the welfare system has no facilities for conjugal living. His father must "sign in" at the front desk when he visits his wife and children.

After school, Tad's Family Friend, Henry, meets him at the shelter. They spend an hour talking, visiting, and working on Tad's reading assignment for school. Then they take a break and walk a few blocks to an ice cream shop for a light snack. Tad's friendship with Henry has given the boy a feeling of stability he's been missing.

- **The Family Friend is a door-opener to the outside world.** Lack of time and money means most children in shelters miss out on entertainment, art, and culture. The Family Friend can give those children a chance to see some goodness and beauty in the world beyond the shelter walls.

- **The Family Friend gives stability to their lives.** The loss of a family's address means the loss of its anchor. The lack of an address makes finding a job even harder, because the employer has no way to contact the job applicant. A Family Friend brings a sense of stability, continuity, and self-esteem—for the children and for the parents. The generous act of a Family Friend can help break down isolation and desperation.

Harriet, 66, became a Family Friend because she loves children. She was paired with 5-year-old Evan, who lived in a shelter with his 23-year-old mother. The boy's father is dead.

"To begin with he was very reserved. But after two or three times with me he became more relaxed. We went skipping down a street one day—that helped. We were laughing and singing. He had the best time," she said. "He calls me grandma."

HOW FAMILY FRIENDS/ HOMELESS CHILDREN STARTED

The Family Friends/Homeless Children program is an outgrowth of NCOA's Family Friends program, which began in 1986 to match volunteers with families of chronically ill or disabled children. The original Family Friends program was funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a philanthropical organization devoted to improving the nation's health care.

In 1990, Family Friends began to help another at-risk group, the rural poor. In contrast to the basic program, which focuses on the chronically ill or disabled child, Rural Family Friends work with entire families in distress.

In the same year, NCOA introduced Family Friends into homeless shelters for families and children. Shelters in Baltimore (Salvation Army), Milwaukee (Social Development Commission), and Dallas (Dallas Jewish Coalition for the Homeless) have matched senior volunteers with parents and children. The result has been the creation of a small alcove of humanity for persons searching for a place to live.

WHAT A FAMILY FRIEND IS

A Family Friend is an older person—listener, talker, storyteller, teacher, mentor, caregiver. A Family Friend is—at various times—supportive, objective, optimistic, curious, informative, helpful, cheerful, or sad. A Family Friend is there when someone needs a shoulder to lean on.

A Family Friend becomes a grandparent to the children and parents. They enjoy helping the families with whom they are matched, and they feel better for the part they play in making Family Friends such a successful program.

Karen, a shy 13-year-old who lives in a Baltimore shelter with her mother and 3-year-old sister, describes Evelyn, her Family Friend: "She's very friendly. From the first day, she was very natural with me, just like she'd known me."

WHAT A FAMILY FRIEND DOES

A Family Friend reads to the children, plays games, draws or paints, sings with the children--and helps the mother budget her meager funds. A Family Friend may help the mother complete an employment or housing application, offer respite to a parent who needs some time to search for work and other lodging, or work with the children on class assignments.

HOW THE PROGRAM OPERATES

Each local Family Friends/Homeless Children project is a coalition of agencies—programs serving homeless families and children, aging programs, and others. Project staff members recruit and screen volunteers and match them to families with children, aged 3-12, who need volunteer help.

Project Director. Each local program is run by a trained professional who has experience with families at risk. The project director recruits and supervises the volunteers, who are asked to make an initial nine-month commitment to the program. Family Friends volunteers spend at least four hours a day, two days a week, with the children. The volunteer is generally reimbursed for transportation and meals.

Evelyn took 12-year-old Jessica on outings twice a week while she lived at a shelter with her father, an unemployed construction worker. They went to Baltimore's Science Center and the National Aquarium. The children, as a group, have gone on a Chesapeake Bay boat ride, learning about boats and ocean life.

A Family Friend may work with an individual child or with groups of children, depending on the local program. The volunteer follows up with the family beyond the initial period, so the children feel a sense of stability.

Advisory Committee. Local programs operate with the guidance of an advisory committee of community leaders experienced in voluntary fundraising—along with educators, social workers, health professionals, housing specialists, specialists on aging, and parents. This committee also provides personal contacts for recruitment, fundraising, and resources—such as children's books, toys, jobs, food, and housing. An interested advisory committee helps the project director get a Family Friends/ Homeless Children program off the ground quickly and effectively.

"The project has made my life brighter and happier."

The local sponsoring agency is responsible for implementing the program—matching volunteers and families, managing the budget, meeting with the local advisory committee, fundraising, and undertaking local public relations and publicity activities.
The sponsoring agency also:

- **Recruits and trains volunteers**, guiding and counseling them throughout the entire period of the match, including follow-up.

- **Provides educational and recreational locations**, such as senior centers and libraries, parks and other sites, including shelters when appropriate, where children can come with volunteers after school—getting them off the streets.

- **Works with public schools** where homeless children are enrolled to develop a pick-up system, with volunteers serving as members of the family, to help children avoid being stigmatized by the "homeless" label.

• **Serves as liaison with "homeless" health projects** for medical attention. Homeless children need basic health care more often—and for more serious reasons—than do children who have a permanent address.

• **Gives the families valuable information** about community services, housing, employment, transportation, job training, education, medical and dental care.

Volunteers. The Rural Family Friends program looks for volunteers who are mature (at least 55 years of age), experienced, emotionally stable, and energetic.A typical volunteer is either still working or retired from teaching, homemaking, nursing, fiscal management, or a number of other professions. Most of them are parents, and many are grandparents.

Screening. Volunteers must be healthy enough to provide active child care, have access to public or private transportation and be able to handle the problems posed by a family's displacement. They must be able to respect and accept their assigned families without being judgmental. They must be good listeners, and they must be flexible. They are interviewed in their own home during a relaxed, informal conversation with a member of the Family Friends/Homeless Children staff. This meeting allows enough time for their questions to be answered and sets up strong two-way communication between the volunteer and staff.

Training. Screening continues throughout the training. At times a volunteer who decides not to become involved with the program may be referred to another volunteer program. But training usually serves as a creative learning experience, inspiring the confidence to be a Family Friend.

Family Friends are trained along practical lines so that they will be able to offer real help to homeless families in a variety of ways. For example, volunteers may be called upon to help families settle into transitional housing or accompany the children to a clinic for their checkup. Family Friends are often in a position to advise these families. Training helps them increase their sensitivity to family needs.

Ed stayed in contact with "his" family even after they left the shelter to live temporarily in a welfare motel until their permanent apartment was ready. They had only a hot plate for cooking and no refrigerator, so Ed's friends joined him in taking food to the family each day. The Sunday school class Ed teaches is busy collecting household and pantry items, as well as toys, to deliver to the family in their new home.

Training consists of two parts—initial and in-service. Initial training is an intensive orientation to the program. The curriculum may include a combination of discussion, guest lectures, and video presentations. During training, volunteers begin to work with parents and children who are enrolled in the program, along with other staff members and volunteers on-site who may already be providing services to homeless families. Talking with these "seasoned" helpers often allays the fear that one must be superhuman to help these families with such deep, special needs.

Volunteers meet their assigned families after completing the initial training program. Continuing education is offered once every five weeks. New volunteers are required to attend continuing education activities during their nine-month commitment, which enables them to interact with staff and each other.

Matching. Matching properly is the key to a successful volunteer program; a good match is good for everyone. The volunteer and parents must like each other, and the staff must have frequent contact with volunteers and families during the early stages of the relationship. Staff members monitor the matches through shelter visits and by telephone with volunteers and their families.

The staff member accompanies the volunteer on the first visit with the family at the shelter. They all agree on a schedule for visits, and they plan the first few activities together. It may take time for the relationship to develop, but the rewards are worth it.

ESTABLISHING A FAMILY FRIENDS/HOMELESS CHILDREN PROGRAM

If you or your organization wants to start a Family Friends/Homeless Children program, here are the basic components.

- **Recruiting volunteers** starts with the personal touch—one-on-one recruitment, a volunteer nominating a friend or relative. Often volunteers are found by personal contact, publicizing the program through brochures, fliers, newspaper articles, senior center newsletters, church or synagogue bulletins, personal appearances at seniors' clubs and housing locations, television and radio announcements, and word of mouth.

Volunteers receive recognition in a special ceremony each spring, during Volunteer Month. In addition, many programs sponsor a holiday party during the winter and a spring or summer picnic or outing for the families and the volunteers.

In the Baltimore program, the children and families spend a day at the Salvation Army summer camp.

• **Selecting families** includes an interview process. Like the volunteers, parents are interviewed about medical histories, current educational and health care services used, family needs and resources, and specific areas in which the Family Friend can be most helpful. At the same time, the staff member evaluates the family's situation to insure the best volunteer match possible.

• **Training volunteers** is the responsibility of the program staff with assistance from NCOA, local faculty, social work agencies, aging organizations, and community groups involved in housing and other initiatives designed for homeless families. The training emphasizes family dynamics, early childhood development, child abuse, and communications skills. Volunteers learn about community resources for referral purposes and for themselves as well.

• **Fundraising** is the key to continuing success for every Family Friends/Homeless Children program. "How to" help in fundraising is available from NCOA. Actual fundraising takes place at the local level, where the community can see for itself the beneficial effects of a Family Friends/Homeless Children program.

Local funding comes from a combination of sources, such as private foundations, family corporations, local businesses, state and county social agencies, and individuals. Often funds may be raised through community events such as fairs, luncheons, and pot-luck dinners, as well as direct mail and personal contact.

Community support and fundraising come through personal and organizational networking, advocacy, and public education. A fundraising advisory committee may be made up of people with previous experience in volunteer or professional fundraising. This committee helps expand community support and identify potential sources of funds and volunteers. The major consideration in choosing committee members is their ability to launch, maintain, and nurture the program.

Help is also sought from leaders of community-based organizations with an interest in at-risk families and children. These organizations may also be sources of older volunteers. Cosponsorship with another organization is effective because it expands the resources and constituencies available to the program.

A letter-writing advocacy campaign to elected officials alerts them to the cost-effective benefits of Family Friends/Homeless Children and doubles as a fundraising activity.

• **Promoting the program** consists of carrying out a public relations campaign to publicize the project, raise funds, and help recruit families and volunteers. A publicity campaign increases the public's awareness of the program and its benefit to the community. The public relations campaign is also an important arm of the fundraising activities.

The campaign—as simple or complex as resources allow—might include an informational brochure; press releases; public service announcements; human interest stories for the local newspaper; articles for the newsletters of community-based organizations, churches, synagogues, and public interest organizations; personal appearances to groups of potential volunteers; special events to attract media attention; and participation in special community events for older adults.

• **Evaluating the program** allows the staff and advisory committee to identify strengths and areas for future improvement. Evaluations are based on reactions from volunteers and families regarding all aspects of the program. Results are cycled back into the planning process to help make decisions on continuing the project, expanding it, or changing the approach.

"They have it rough, moving from shelter to shelter without a father figure, without the guidance of a second parent," says Family Friend Ed Scoggins. "I want them to know I'm committed to them and I care what happens. Most important, I want them to feel good about themselves."

HELP AVAILABLE FROM NCOA

NCOA's Family Friends Resource Center offers materials and technical assistance each step of the way to help initiate your program. We can work with you on volunteer training, staff development, program planning, fundraising, and all other aspects of developing a successful program. We offer on-site consulting services to help you establish a successful Family Friends/Homeless Children project in your community. You may call to get assistance or you may contract for specific, on-site, extensive consultation.

If you would like to set up a Family Friends/Homeless Children project in your community—call or write:
The National Council on the Aging, Inc.
Family Friends Resource Center,
409 Third Street SW, Washington, DC 20024.
Telephone (202) 479-6675 • FAX (202) 479-0735

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Baltimore, MD 21202
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231 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53203
(414) 272-5600

THE DALLAS JEWISH COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS
Suite 162
10830 North Central Expressway
Dallas, TX 75231
(214) 696-8300

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING, INC., established in 1950, is the national organization for professionals and volunteers who work to improve the quality of life for older Americans. Intergenerational programming has been a major focus at NCOA. It enhances the understanding of how Americans—of all ages—can work together to help bring some relief to families facing formidable responsibilities. NCOA also serves as a national resource for information, training, technical assistance, advocacy, and research on every aspect of aging.

THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION of Princeton, New Jersey, is one of the nation's largest private philanthropic organizations and is devoted to improving the nation's health care through a grant-giving program amounting to approximately $160 million annually. In 1986, The Foundation awarded grants to underwrite Family Friends projects in eight cities across America. The program is designed to demonstrate ways in which older volunteers can work effectively with chronically ill or disabled children and their families. A grant was also awarded to **The National Council on the Aging** to provide technical assistance and direction for the program. More recently, The Foundation awarded a grant to NCOA to disseminate information about Family Friends through public education.

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